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**The Dystopian City: Gendered Interpretations
of the Urban in *Um Céu de Estrelas* (Tata Amaral, 1996)
and *Vagón fumador* (Verónica Chen, 2001)**

Charlotte Gleghorn

Contemporary women's film production in the revivals

The cinematic revivals which emerged in Argentina and Brazil during the 1990s have both been marked by the increased participation of women directors. In fact, when viewed within the parameters of the film revivals in both countries, the increased visibility of women directors is one of the few discernible features of these umbrella movements, which otherwise display a vast array of aesthetics and themes. Record numbers of female directors released films in the year 2005 in Argentina, constituting approximately twenty per cent of national releases for that year (Vilaboa & García 2007). Similarly, in Brazil it is estimated that approximately twenty per cent of the productions released from the mid- to late- 1990s were directed by women (Schild 1998: 125).

Increased women's participation in both movements has been associated with the measures taken by the state to promote cinematic production in adverse circumstances. Following the near collapse of Brazil's film industry under President Fernando Collor de Melo (1990-1992), the implementation of the 1993 *Lei do Audiovisual* [Audiovisual Law] succeeded in stimulating the rebirth of film production in the country. Whilst a number of established **film-makers** continued to make films throughout the 1990s, thus consolidating this rebirth, one of the most discernible features of the *retomada* is the emergence of new directors, who had previously only worked on short-films. The competitions for *opere prime* have had a particularly noticeable effect on the numbers of Brazilian women directors, with forty-one women directing debut feature films between 1990 and 2002 (Caetano 2007: 208).

Indeed, *Um Céu de Estrelas/A Starry Sky* (Tata Amaral 1996), the Brazilian film to be analysed in this chapter, is one such *opera prima*.

In Argentina, whilst the 1980s witnessed a revival in production following the dearth of national productions under dictatorship rule, the early 1990s once again marked a crisis in the industry. The Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA), which substituted the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (INC) in 1994, formed a fund for low-budget film production and introduced competitive categories for first-time **film-makers**, including a special category for debuts by women directors, as part of its *Ley de cine* [Film Law] legislation. These incentives account for many of the filmic interventions of the 1990s, coupled with the surge in attendance at film schools. In addition, the Mar del Plata international film festival relaunched the ‘La mujer y el cine’ [‘Woman and Film’] competition in 1996, thus providing an international platform for women **film-makers** (Rangil 2001: 8).

Although the increased participation of women directors is repeatedly cited as one of the key features of these two film revivals, little in-depth analysis of their films has been undertaken, resulting in a general appraisal of the notable presence of women directors, coupled with a critical disengagement with their films. In light of the above, the present chapter analyses two films directed by women, *Um Céu de Estrelas* (Tata Amaral 1996) and *Vagón fumador/Smokers Only* (Verónica Chen 2001), from Brazil and Argentina, respectively, with regards to their depiction of city space. As films which map urban dynamics and anxieties, they offer valuable insights into how women cultural practitioners negotiate and interpret cities, offering alternative visions of the metropolis to those presented in commercially successful and internationally distributed Latin American films of recent years.

The gendering of space

Integral to this discussion of the gendered and sexualised nature of urban space is the constructed separation between public and private spheres. The Habermasian distinction made between the two realms, as articulated in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), rests on the assumption that all sectors of the population have equal access to public space, where they may engage with political processes as *citizens* and demand that the governing body be held accountable for its actions. However, these same public spaces simultaneously regulate activities which should remain out of view, namely, although not exclusively, sexual relations.

The recent international successes of a number of urban-themed Latin American films, namely *Amores Perros/Love's a Bitch* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2000), *Pizza, birra, faso/Pizza, Beer, Fags* (Adrián Caetano & Bruno Stagnaro 1998), *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Fernando Meirelles & Kátia Lund 2002) and *Tropa de Elite/Elite Squad* (José Padilha 2007), have disseminated a largely dystopian vision of the city. Furthermore, these films have done much to inculcate a predominant aesthetic of the city, marked by handheld camerawork, location shooting, music-video editing and the striking inequalities which exist between distinct sectors of the population, usually associated with equally distinct zones of the city. These depictions of the city are also, as Geoffrey Kantaris notes, invariably **sexualised**, 'tend[ing] to pander to a stereotypical conflation of hypermasculinity and violence' (Kantaris 2008: 163). Indeed, the omnipresent figure of the male assassin or drug dealer, and the secondary, 'ornamental' roles female characters often play in these films, underline a predominantly masculine perspective on urban space which neglects the experiences of women who inhabit these same cities. The following discussion of *Um Céu de Estrelas* and *Vagón fumador* demonstrates that there are alternative ways to portray the Latin

American megalopolis which contrast with the hyper-masculine imaginaries typical of the aforementioned productions.

Um Céu de Estrelas

Um Céu de Estrelas tells the story of Dalva (Alleyona Cavalli), a young woman from Moóca, São Paulo, who has won a plane ticket to Miami to take part in a hairdressing competition. She dreams of leaving her mundane life in Moóca and aspires to a greater future away from her mother (Néa Simões) and her ex-boyfriend, Vítor (Paulo Vespúcio). Dalva's preparations take a tragic turn when Vítor pays an unexpected visit to her house as she is packing her suitcase. He demands that Dalva give him another chance and, angry and dejected, informs Dalva's mother that her daughter is planning to leave without telling her. Later, he shoots and kills the mother, holding Dalva hostage to his violent outbursts. After the first shooting the police are alerted and surround the house, encouraging Vítor to release Dalva and her mother, whom they do not realise is already dead, and turn himself in. After a series of dramatic confrontations between the couple inside the house, Dalva kills Vítor with his gun and emerges from the house, ashen and traumatised by the experience, under the watchful eye of the television reporter (played by Lígia Cortez) who is documenting the hostage situation.

Um Céu de Estrelas is based on the homonymous novel (1991) by Fernando Bonassi, who was also one of the screenwriters involved in adapting the novel for the film version. In the transition from novel to screen, however, the narrative undergoes some important changes, notably in the gender optic of the protagonist and in the downplaying of the socio-political context of the urban district of Moóca. In Bonassi's original the narrative is written from the point of view of the male character, the unemployed and frustrated Vítor, but in the filmic version it is his ex-girlfriend, Dalva, who assumes the lead role. Indeed, this shift in perspective reflects Tata Amaral's broader cinematic project of investigating female archetypes in the three feature films she has hitherto directed: *Um Céu de Estrelas* (1996),

Através da Janela/Through the Window (2000), and most recently the film version of the highly successful Globo television series, *Antônia* (2006).¹

The film is divided into two parts; the first, a short film by another director, Francisco César Filho, and the second, the main feature directed by Tata Amaral. The short film, named ‘Moóca, São Paulo, 1996’ in titles which appear on the screen, literally maps the social and physical coordinates that provide the backdrop for the main narrative, and was commissioned by Amaral to extend its duration as she was advised that at barely one hour long her feature film was unlikely to secure theatrical release (Amaral 1998: 28). The opening short both serves to establish the location for the main film and dialogues with the central narrative in the repetition of aural motifs which appear on the soundtrack of both the short and the longer feature which comprise *Um Céu de Estrelas*.

Moóca, located to the East of the centre of São Paulo, was one of the principal zones of industrialisation in the early twentieth century, when the city was expanding its horizons and rapidly ‘modernising’ its infrastructure and industries (Caldeira 2000: 13-14). Primarily settled by immigrant Italian families, the area has since suffered the effects of deindustrialisation as many factories have relocated to the outskirts of the city. The short film which launches *Um Céu de Estrelas*, shot in Hi-6 video and in black and white, confirms the area’s foundations as an Italian neighbourhood, opening with insert shots of passport photographs of Italian immigrants. These photographs then cede to a white screen, before the camera rests on the image of a still urban landscape of factory chimneys with high-rise buildings in the background, an establishing shot which determines the film’s urban location from the outset. Titles appear superimposed on the cityscape, alerting the spectator to the exact location and time of the images – ‘Moóca, São Paulo, 1996’ – and the noises of traffic and trains begin to sound. A vertiginous camera explores the structure of factories and houses

in the area from all angles, climbing the walls, traversing them and then descending them on the other side. In addition, the editing cuts in time with the frenetic percussion on the soundtrack as the camera changes direction of movement at frequent intervals. The movement of the camera, coupled with the hallmark sounds of a busy city, contrasts with the images of disused warehouses and factories, buildings in decay which had once been the edifice of modernity and industrialisation.

The central narrative, filmed in 16mm, emerges as a counterpoint to the short film, both in theme and aesthetic style. The austere black, white and greys of the filmic prologue give way to the vivid colours of Dalva's home, creating a marked contrast between the shots of life on the streets of Moóca and the interior experience of Dalva in her home (Bastos 1998: 77). Indeed, Brazilian film scholar Lúcia Nagib (2000), in her analysis of the differences between the politically committed and utopian perspectives typical of the *cinema novo* films of the 1960s and more recent productions, suggests that the latter are more interested in *micro*-narratives, personal stories which make up the Brazilian 'whole'. Nagib states, 'instead of the political Brazil which the Cinema Novo film makers wanted to reveal, it is an intimate Brazil that they aspire to portray' (Nagib 2000). She cites *Um Céu de Estrelas* as a prime exponent of this 'cinema of intimacy' which surfaces in 1990s Brazil, as it 'concentrates obsessively on the individuality of the characters to the detriment of the social context, being limited basically to two protagonists enclosed in the tiny rooms of a poor house' (Nagib 2000). However, the film's commitment to depicting the interior world of Dalva's life does not undermine the broader socio-political concerns the film expresses. Rather, it is in the film's delicate balance between the domestic argument which occurs within the house and its framing within a broader discourse of violence in the city that *Um Céu* is most effective in **destabilising** the perceived boundary between public and private realms.

The opening scene is illustrative of the tension established between the inside and outside world in the narrative space of the film. It begins with the interior of Dalva's bedroom, covered in bright coloured posters and decorative items, as she packs her suitcase to leave for Miami. The bedroom window gives onto a cityscape with a grey sky, a city punctuated with the relentless sound of traffic and trains. The doorbell rings and the camera momentarily abandons Dalva, zooming through the window frame to observe her neighbourhood, whilst she leaves the bedroom to answer the door. In this way, the opening scene clearly establishes the contrast which exists throughout the film between the events contained *within* the frame and those which move *beyond* it, in the exterior world.

The friction between the domestic environment, where we see Dalva preparing for her future trip to Miami, and the diegetic elements which enter the narrative from outside the camera's frame, also suggests Dalva's containment and suffocation in domestic space. Indeed, much scholarly work has considered the development of the division of space in gendered terms and the prohibited 'public' sphere of the city streets for women citizens. Feminist scholars have been particularly attuned to the need to view domestic space as a sphere which is not beyond public institutions and policies but rather deeply affected by them, particularly in the case of domestic violence. As Nancy Duncan (1996) writes,

Paradoxically the home which is usually thought to be gendered feminine has also traditionally been subject to the patriarchal authority of the husband and father. Personal freedoms of the male head of household often impinge on, or in extreme cases, negate the rights, autonomy and safety of women and children who occupy these spaces. The designation of the home as a private space limits the role of political institutions and social movements in changing power relations within the family. (1996: 131)

The violent domestic situation in which Dalva is caught up certainly suggests that the home is deeply embedded in the daily practices of patriarchy. The focus on Dalva's domestic space

both offers a window onto the intimate experience of suffocation which characterises her existence in this neighbourhood and, moreover, visually and aurally demonstrates the overlap of private and public concerns as the domestic *mise-en-scène* is frequently polluted with exterior influences. The film thus creates a continuum between the oppression Dalva experiences within the enclosed space of the home and the urban environment which envelopes it.

Dalva's preparations for her travels are rapidly disturbed with the unannounced arrival of Vítor, her ex-boyfriend, at the door. Dalva first sees him through the bars on her front door, bars which once again alert the spectator to her suffocation and confinement within the four walls of her home. These bars point to the threat of external violence, exemplified in the disruptive force of Vítor who invades her private space. The violence which disrupts Dalva's life is significantly configured as an exterior force which comes from the space of the city around her. Indeed, the frequent shots of Dalva pressed against openings in the walls, windows which are an aperture onto the world, emphasise her desire to leave home and escape her domestic space.

Teresa Caldeira's (2000) discussion of what she terms the 'aesthetics of security' in modern-day São Paulo is illustrative here of the delineation of public and private space in the city (Caldeira 2000: 291). Caldeira suggests that the increased use of surveillance systems, gates, barriers and bars on windows and doors, and the emergence of self-contained enclaves which erect fortified walls around themselves, point to the collapse of social relations in a city which is fraught with fear and violence. Caldeira's analysis not only undermines the persistent distinction made between private and public realms, as both spheres may in fact 'feed' each others' practices, but also highlights the importance of *visual* strategies of spatial demarcation. According to Caldeira (2000),

The built environment is not a neutral stage for the unfolding of social relations. The quality of the built environment inevitably influences the quality of the social

interactions that take place there [...] The material spaces that constitute the stage for public life influence the types of social relations possible on it. (2000: 298-299)

This spatial demarcation is brought to the fore in *Um Céu de Estrelas* in the repeated shots of bars across windows and doors as Dalva looks out from her ‘private’ space onto the ‘public’ space below. The views glimpsed from the windows reveal a distorted city, with the heat waves affecting the image of the tower blocks outside. This ‘aesthetic of security’ as Dalva looks through the bars, which seemingly incarcerate her in domestic space, is not, however, completely impenetrable.

Soundscapes and media violence

Throughout the film sounds of the city, such as trains, traffic and even police announcements given over megaphones, perforate the illusion of a hermetically sealed domestic private space, as they collapse the perceived barrier which separates public from private realm. All of these sounds are present in both the short film and the main feature, thus fomenting a kind of sound bridge, a cross-fertilisation of aural motifs, between the two sections of the film.² Furthermore, the role of sound in *Um Céu de Estrelas*, contributes significantly to what Carlos Alberto Mattos (1997) has termed the ‘espaço off’ [‘off-camera space’] in the film – those elements which are not rendered visible in the frame but which assume an important role in the construction of the film’s narrative as a whole. As Mattos writes in his review of the film, ‘é o inferno sonoro do subúrbio, assombrado pelos cultos, pela TV, pelo crime e pelo mau gosto. Nada aparece no quadro, mas penetra-o com virtual violência’ [‘this is the hellish sound of the slums, overshadowed by religious cults, television, crime and bad taste. Nothing appears in the frame yet it is penetrated with virtual violence’] (Mattos 1997).

Indeed, this ‘virtual violence’ is integral to the film’s dissection of public and private space, and the media discourse which surrounds violence in the city of São Paulo today.

The tension between the interior and exterior perspectives on the events which unfold in Dalva’s home is most flagrantly accentuated with the arrival of the police and the television crew. The ‘off’ action of the police, which penetrates the *mise-en-scène* by way of the powerful spotlight beams which circulate the front room from outside, coupled with the sirens and megaphone appeals to Vítor to turn himself in, references a particularly dominant public discourse on violence in the city. This discourse is further illustrated in the second key ‘off’ action, namely the televised scenes of the *seqüestro* [kidnapping], which package this domestic dispute to satisfy the morbid curiosity of the wider public.

The television report outside the house engulfs the entire frame of the film as Dalva and Vítor watch the events from home, and the spectator discovers along with the protagonists the media’s interpretation of events. The journalist’s report appears with a small ‘VIVO’ [‘LIVE’] to the upper right-hand corner of the screen, highlighting the immediacy of the event and exaggerating this *fait-divers* as an example of escalating violence in the society as a whole. The reporter informs us that the GATE, a special branch of the Military Police in São Paulo, are heavily armed and poised for action on the rooftops of neighbouring houses, as they await the fate of the hostages in Dalva’s house. The direct discourse of the live television transmission mediates the ‘action’ for the spectator, literally transmitting it in its precise moment. Indeed, *Um Céu de Estrelas* is not the only recent Brazilian film to explore the predatory nature of media representations. *Ônibus 174/Bus 174* (José Padilha & Felipe Lacerda, 2002), which portrays the bus hijacking which took place in broad daylight on June 12, 2000, in Rio, bears striking parallels with *Um Céu de Estrelas* in the sense that it conveys a disjuncture between ‘inside’ the bus – the film goes to great lengths to describe the hijacker’s life and past – and the discourse portrayed ‘outside’, in the media’s coverage of the

event. Amaral's film similarly experiments with the inadequacies of media discourse, which cannot capture the true meaning of the hostage situation in which Dalva is involved, emphasised by the contrast between the frequent point-of-view shots from Dalva's perspective in the house and the television's objectification of her in the report.

The power of the media to not only penetrate Dalva's experience but also *inform* it could be viewed as an example of the prevalence of reality discourse in contemporary society. *Um Céu de Estrelas* enacts a distorted *mise-en-abyme* of Dalva's situation, as the latter realises that she has been *seqüestrada* [kidnapped] only by way of the television images and journalist's report on the small screen in her kitchen. Indeed, given the fact that Vítor is not a stranger in Dalva's life, the archetypal intruder or *favelado* [slum dweller], it is perhaps understandable that Dalva herself does not perceive this situation as a hostage situation but rather a domestic dispute. From the outside, the reporter informs the spectator of the full names of the people involved in the hostage situation, names which further embed the characters in the Italian heritage of Moóca (Dalva and Lurdes Bartolotto). Their ages, professions and personal history also feature in the reporter's version of events, information which has hitherto been withheld or only partially insinuated in conversations between the two former lovers. Whilst the television reporter highlights the fact that the victim and aggressor were romantically involved and due to marry until a few weeks prior to the hostage scenario, she nonetheless hyperbolises this violent situation in the language of the predatory media.³ The juxtaposition of Dalva's interpretation of Vítor's violence (domestic dispute) and the media's interpretation (fear of violence of city) in the film frames the former in terms of the latter, thus suggesting that the microcosm of the domestic situation might act as a synecdoche for broader societal disintegration. The voyeuristic imperative of the live television event, exemplified both in contemporary news coverage and in the explosion of

reality TV programmes, pervades city space, transmitting violence and fear to citizens who become increasingly insecure and retreat from the public spaces of transport, streets and squares. This in turn dramatises the permeable boundaries between public and private as the former penetrates the latter and transforms the situation. In this way, the film delineates a boundary between the realism of the images of the hostage situation within the house, and the simulacra of reality created in the journalist's account of what is happening.

The collapse of the distinction between private and public realms is visually reiterated in the spectator's subsequent collusion with the voyeuristic eye of the television camera. The camera mediates our involvement in the events which mark the end of the film, negotiating the spectator's gaze on Dalva as the cameras enter the house following the sound of the gunshot heard from outside. In the end it is the 'olho da cidade, através do olho da TV, que invade a casa, é o ambiente que cerca a casa [...] que leva à espetacularização da mídia frente ao problema. A tragédia se completa com a invasão da casa pela cidade/mídia' ['city's gaze, by way of the TV's gaze, which invades the home, it is the atmosphere which surrounds the house [...] which leads to the **spectacularisation** of the media when confronted with this situation. The tragedy becomes complete when the house is invaded by the city/media'] (Alvarenga, 2004: 141). In this way the structure of the film comes full circle, with the reinscription of the city, and Moóca, in the close of the film. The specific place where the hostage situation occurred is restated following the closing credits, all the while accompanied by the sound of urban disturbance characterised by police sirens and helicopters, when the reporter reappears to finally close *Um Céu de Estrelas* with the tragic words 'duas mortes aqui na Moóca, zona leste de São Paulo' (two deaths here in Moóca, in the East of São Paulo). Dalva's domestic tragedy is thus incorporated into a greater tragedy of violence in the city.

Where *Um Céu de Estrelas* takes place almost entirely in Dalva's home, *Vagón fumador* sustains a dialogue with the overtly public space of the streets of Buenos Aires. Intimate relations which, according to modernist approaches to city living, should be kept behind doors, here evolve in the *plazas* and cash machine cubicles of the Argentine capital. The police and the television reporter, who together constitute the 'city gaze' in *Um Céu de Estrelas*, find a parallel in another technique of panopticism: the watchful eye of the CCTV camera perspective which mediates the spectator's vision of events in *Vagón fumador*.

Vagón fumador

Verónica Chen's first film, *Vagón fumador*, could ostensibly be described as an unconventional love story set in nocturnal Buenos Aires. The film speaks of the doubts and frustrations of the protagonist, Reni (Cecilia Bengolea), who dreams of moving far away to begin a more meaningful life. Her counterpart, Andrés (Leonardo Brezicki), is a rent boy who works in the confined, and overtly public, spaces of the cash dispenser cubicles in the city. Together, they wander the streets of Buenos Aires, discussing their hopes, fears and aspirations. However, their relationship unfolds into a doomed love affair; whilst Reni verbalises feelings of alienation and disenchantment with the metropole, Andrés believes the city fulfils his needs and desires.

Like *Um Céu de Estrelas*, *Vagón* establishes a strong contrast between private, interior space and the public space of the city streets and buildings from the onset. This is highlighted in the opening scenes when Reni is first introduced to the spectator. She appears alone and naked in a bathroom, accompanied by the sound of running water in the bath. The camera is disorienting; it reveals the contours of her body in fragments, with extreme close-ups of her feet and waist, disturbing our sense of her physical whole. The camera watches as she undresses and then assumes her perspective as she submerges herself in the water, blowing bubbles and looking up at the reflection above. This sequence finishes with a shot of

the window above the bath, the outlet on to the world, which instead of openness and freedom seems to evoke confinement with its prison aesthetic of vertical bars. Indeed, these vertical bars are reminiscent of Dalva's confinement and the 'aesthetics of security' in São Paulo, echoing the same domestic enclosure of the Brazilian film in the *mise-en-scène* of the bathroom scene in *Vagón*.

This image of imprisonment contrasts starkly with the credit sequence which follows, depicting trees and sky shot from a train accompanied by the sound of a train travelling on tracks. The vast open space of the sky and the natural vitality of plants and trees viewed from the train appear as the antithesis of the closed, blanded space of the bathroom. This contrast is further underlined when the film abruptly cuts back to the bathroom scene to witness Reni smashing something on the floor and cutting her wrist with the sharp edge. Although this event is not explained in the narrative, the spectator can only infer that this is a suicide attempt, as we are encouraged to contemplate her blood dispersing in the water in slow motion. The image of the blood staining the transparency of the bath water, moreover, points to the theme of contamination which becomes a central concern of the film's discussion of prostitution and urban space. The juxtaposition of the colourful, expansive exterior and the sterile, tiled interior of the bathroom effectively establishes the contrasting aesthetics used to represent private and public space in the film.

Voyeurism, Surveillance and Flânerie

As Reni wanders around the city streets she consistently deciphers her surroundings through the gaze, most notably in the trope of looking at Andrés as he engages in sexual relations with his clients in the ATM spaces of the Banco Francés. Her 'reading' of the city propels the rhythm of the film as the editing cuts between objects of her gaze and intermittently slows down or speeds up the footage. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (2000) is instructive here in its analysis of voyeurism and scopophilia as integral to

the architecture of cinema. Mulvey's article theorises the relationship between the bearer of the look, the character being looked at, and psychoanalytic theory on gender difference. Mulvey describes 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' (Mulvey 2000: 39), effectively reiterating the position of 'structures of ways of seeing and [the] pleasure in looking' in cinema (Mulvey 2000: 35). These structures, which permeate the form, content and reception of cinematic texts, are similarly delineated in Chen's film.

Reni's looking is first thematised through a shot of her staring directly at the cash machine area. Observing the two men in the confined area of the bank, the erotic pleasure and intrigue of looking is established by way of a point-of-view shot from Reni's perspective. Yet significantly here, Reni's curiosity, illustrated through her staring at the men, challenges the assumption that women are generally constructed as object of the gaze. The protagonist's intrigue for the sexual exploits of Andrés renders the man-on-man encounter a spectacle and reverses the classical construction of the woman's body as fetishised object. Whilst Andrés later emerges to hold a predatory sexualised gaze as well – and it is important to underline that Reni's ultimate involvement in prostitution is far from liberating – it is significant that Chen's female protagonist should yield some aspect of scopic power.

Reni's visual deciphering of the city, whilst radically different in terms of gender, class and epoch, harks back to the literary construct of the *flâneur*, which in turn reveals the film's concern for the experience of modernity. The *flâneur*, the elite male character who interprets the arcades and boulevards of Paris in the texts of Charles Baudelaire, has become the subject of much critical enquiry, particularly regarding possible permutations of the character in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, in its cinematic form, the *flâneur* expressly conflates voyeurism and power. According to AlSayyad, 'the advent of cinema itself has enabled a "new mode of *flânerie*", a wandering around the city and a new ability to conceive of it as a spectacle and a source of sensory experience' (AlSayyad 2006:

35). The visual saturation and sensory experience of which AlSayyad writes may be intuited throughout *Vagón* with the soundtrack's abstract chiming musical notes adding flavour to the nightscape of overexposed neon lights. Moreover, Reni's embodiment of the *flâneuse* defies the restricted movement of women on the street and questions the modernist assumptions which legitimised this strict distinction between public and private realms, relegating women to the home.⁴

There is, however, a more sinister watchful eye which is portrayed at this early stage of the film's narrative, illustrative of the urban surveillance culture commonly associated with late capitalist societies. AlSayyad suggests that 'in an era when cameras and other systems of surveillance are ubiquitous in both public and private spaces, the boundaries of the city are no longer defined by monumental entrances, but by electronic devices' (AlSayyad 2006: 147). *Vagón fumador* exhibits these controlling mechanisms of technology by illustrating footage shot from a security camera. A centre establishing shot of the front of the Banco Francés in the city switches to black and white CCTV footage of Andrés and his male client as they are filmed by the security cameras directed at the ATMs. Within the confines of the cubicle Andrés engages in sexual activities in exchange for money, all the time under the watchful eyes of Reni and the security camera. This panoptic authority, the invisible voyeur-machine, is emphasised by the angle of the footage we are presented with; the spectator looks, by mediation of the security camera, *down* on the couple as they interact by the cash machine, illustrating the power hierarchy inherent in this camera perspective. Moreover, the use of the enclosed spaces of cash machines as the setting for the exchange of sex for money underlines the flows of capital in an increasingly unequal and consumer society. Andrés himself underlines this connection as he willingly places a price on his body when he proclaims in the film 'Andrés es caro, el que quiere celeste que le cueste, Andrés cuesta

\$150' ['Andrés is expensive, nothing ventured, nothing gained, Andrés costs \$150']. Andrés's statement also refers to himself in the third person, thus **emphasising** his alienation and his detached status as a citizen.⁵

The 'voyeur-god': mapping the city

Reni's attempt to make sense of the city through the gaze is further **problematised** in a scene where the couple look out from a roof top, dazed by the lights of nocturnal Buenos Aires. Indeed, this scene recalls the words of theorist Michel de Certeau, who describes the position of the person who looks down on the cityscape as a 'voyeur-god', thus expressing the power relationship embodied in such a panoramic shot (de Certeau 1984: 93). The height turns the characters into 'voyeur-god[s]' of the city, as they gaze and attempt to dominate and **rationalise** the space below them. Reni's description of Buenos Aires as a 'pulpo con miles de tentáculos' ['octopus with thousands of tentacles'] is effectively imaged as we trace the city's tentacles of lights at night, spreading out in different directions as the camera pans around the space, finally resting on the couple as the centre – the head – of the octopus. This shot explicitly reveals the interconnectedness of the characters and the city: Reni and Andrés are to be found at the centre of the monster, yet simultaneously they are isolated and distanced from the tentacles of activity. Their vision of the city down below does not, however, enable a true grasp of the space and design of the city; rather, it appears as a mirage, an illusion and construct which will always remain intangible, beyond their reach, pointing to a decidedly frustrated attempt at dominating the urban environment through panopticism.

The disjuncture between the modernist dream of rational urban utopia, embodied in the monumental landmarks of Buenos Aires, and the reality of social exclusion and loneliness, is at the heart of *Vagón*'s depiction of the city. Moreover, *Vagón*'s exploitation of

the cityscape as the backdrop for the narrative in many ways echoes Henri Lefebvre's (1996) interpretation of urban space:

On its specific plane the city can appropriate existing political, religious and philosophical meanings. It seizes them to say them, to *expose* them by means – or through the voice – of buildings, monuments, and also by streets and squares, by voids, by the spontaneous **theatricalisation** of encounters which take place in it. (Lefebvre 1996: 113-114)

This '**theatricalisation** of encounters' becomes a particularly potent concept when considering the inventive appropriation of urban landmarks in Chen's film. The rearticulation of monumental space within *Vagón* comes to the fore in the setting of the Plaza San Martín – one of the main squares in central Buenos Aires commemorating the country's liberator – which features in the film as the hangout for prostitutes. This square, which not only celebrates San Martín but is also flanked by imposing militaristic buildings, such as the Palacio La Paz, which houses the Military Officers' Association, here appears as a site of sexual transactions as the taxi-boys negotiate their next client's rate, all the time circulating the plaza on rollerblades. The film does not dwell on mapping recognisable places of Buenos Aires, but instead destabilises landmarks of the city and nation by reworking their significance or by repositioning their centrality at the margins of the frame. Indeed, one could even suggest that Chen's film displays a certain playful irreverence at these sites of national pride.

This particular interface between the body and the city contests the urban legislation which censors the occupation of public space for non-normative practices. Indeed, in the specific context of Buenos Aires, this issue came to the fore following the implementation of the *Código de Convivencia Urbana* [Code of Urban Co-existence] in 1996, which provoked a fierce debate on the presence of prostitution in different areas of the city. This constitution repealed the existing laws governing homo- and transexuality, and was finally approved in

March 1998, although it underwent numerous amendments in the months which followed (Álvarez 2000: 137). Both the media hype surrounding the Code, and the neighbourhood rallies against prostitution on the streets of selected neighbourhoods, enacted an ‘othering’ of certain sectors of the population, mapping sexual dissidence onto latent racial prejudice, as exemplified in the following exclamation by the prominent television personality, Mirtha Legrand: ‘Todo lo que es prostitución y travestismo ya llega hasta la zona de Recoleta, vienen de países limítrofes’ [‘Now the prostitutes and transvestites even reach the Recoleta neighbourhood, and they come from neighbouring countries’] (qtd. in Sabsay 2005: 176). Thus, the debate surrounding the Code redefined the ‘city as resident-space, as an aggregate of neighbourhoods besieged by undesirables who did not belong, who, that is, were not residents’ (Álvarez 2000: 138). *Vagón fumador*’s central focus on prostitution, then, mirrors the societal changes in Buenos Aires of the late 1990s, performing the anxiety of some city dwellers towards the illicit activities of the night through the perspective of the curious yet reluctant Reni.

Desamor

The prevalence of monuments and consumerism in *Vagón fumador* serves to emphasise the cityscape’s dominance over the characters’ lives and creates a greater contrast between the dream of an other (utopian) space and the city itself. This is clearly illustrated in a flashback scene towards the end of the film when Reni and Andrés escape to the ‘country’ to celebrate her birthday. Here an interstitial space emerges at the outskirts of Buenos Aires by the Río de la Plata, in the Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur, with a beach by the river and the towers of the metropole’s centre behind them, echoing Beatriz Sarlo’s description of *las orillas* (the river bank) as ‘an indeterminate place between the city and the countryside’ (Sarlo 1993: 169). Furthermore, the pollution of the river, which prohibits the couple from bathing, references the all-pervasive influence of the metropolis and its contamination of space. Reni’s

attempts to leave the city thus seem continually undermined by the reassertion of the city in seemingly non-urban spaces. Indeed, the elliptical nature of the film's structure, which continually returns to the apparently suicidal act which occurs at the beginning of the film, seems to suggest that the cutting of her wrist was precipitated by the doomed love affair between Reni and Andrés. The permeable nature of private and public space is here brought to the fore as tensions which evolve in public play themselves out in intimate spaces. In both of these respects *Vagón fumador* seems to resist the spatial binaries of private and public, rural and urban.

The closing scene of *Vagón fumador*, however, implies Reni's escape from the city, as we see her look out of the train window, light up a cigarette and find a place of belonging as she leaves Buenos Aires behind. Thus, the oppositional relationship established in the film between the utopian place which lies beyond the limits of Buenos Aires and the city itself is brought to fruition in a third space, the no-man's-land of the train carriage which inspired the film's title. Nevertheless, Reni's efforts to liberate herself are not entirely fulfilled – whilst on the one hand she appears to finally understand who she is and what she wants, on the other, she remains firmly under control in the contained and prohibitive space of the smokers' carriage. Furthermore, the train carriage, as de Certeau insightfully pointed out, is 'a bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity' (de Certeau 1984: 111). Reni's retreat to this monitored and enclosed space thus enacts a return to the panopticism of the city, even as she is seemingly in transit towards another space.

Conclusion: spatial discourse and failed projects of modernity

Both the 'voyeur-God' and CCTV panopticism in *Vagón fumador*, and the disjuncture between Dalva's subjectivity and the version of events presented by the media, reference the dissolution of promise in the urban milieu. Where once the city heralded a utopian future,

with the possibility of equality and inclusion, here the cities of São Paulo and Buenos Aires emerge at moments of national upheaval in the filmic imaginary. *Vagón*'s prescience into the stark connection between bodily commodification and the economic crisis reveals the intimate connection of body and city on the streets of Buenos Aires, pointing to the uneven experience of the megalopolis and its inhabitants' rights.

For its own part *Um Céu de Estrelas* breaks with the common filmic techniques to represent the *periferia* [outskirts], avoiding establishing shots of the city and the *favelas* (slums), and preferring to highlight the invasion of Dalva's domestic space by the discourse of urban violence and marginalisation. It also significantly offers a feminine interpretation of the cityscape, highlighting the oft-ignored violence which goes on behind closed doors and offering the protagonist agency through the camera's perspective throughout the film. Like the *menemista* privatisation of space which promoted a retreat into the enclosed spaces of the city, also reminiscent of the restricted use of public spaces during the dictatorship era,⁶ *Um Céu de Estrelas*'s depiction of the media's manipulation of Dalva's tragedy highlights the spectacularisation of violence under Cardoso's presidency (1995-2002), suggesting that private violence may act as a cipher of familial and urban disintegration.

Both films attest to the disjunctive experience of the metropolis in light of the exaggerated, yet disputed, distinctions between public and private realms accommodated by neoliberal economic policy and urban planning. These films present female protagonists in films directed by women, thus counteracting the commonplace masculinisation of the city in recent Latin American film. Through their renegotiation of power structures, and resistance to standard ways of representing the city, these directors reimagine the celluloid body as the privileged site to reassert the inter-pollination of private and public spheres.

Notes

¹ All three feature films are based in São Paulo. *Antônia* in particular brings the marginalization of the *favela* [slums] to the fore in its setting in Vila Brasilândia, in the North of São Paulo.

² In fact, whilst the visuals were already completed when Amaral commissioned Francisco César Filho to direct the short film, she had not finalized the audio track, and thus the overlap of aural motifs was made possible between short and main feature (Amaral 1998: 30).

³ It is worth noting that the television reporter appears as a caricature of the media's reporting of events and as such self-consciously mocks the journalist's sensational and exaggerated tone.

⁴ In the Brazilian context, the film *A Hora da Estrela/Hour of the Star* (Suzana Amaral 1985) also interrogates the motif of the wandering woman on the streets of São Paulo, but challenges the opportunities of the city available to the protagonist of the film, Macabea, an impoverished *nordestina* [northeasterner] who struggles to make a living and has no family. The film is based on the homonymous novel by Clarice Lispector (1977) but significantly shifts its urban location from Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo.

⁵ The exploitation of such a space to stage the narrative reveals a poignant prediction of the fast approaching economic crash which would unfold in late 2001. Whilst the director herself acknowledges that there was no intended connection to be made between the economy, consumerism and sex, the film has undoubtedly been interpreted in light of the crisis.

⁶ Emanuela Guano writes of the perceived primacy of the private in the military dictatorship's discourse when it was intent on silencing public opposition. Whilst there are obvious differences between *menemista* spatial discourse and that of the military

generals, the emphasis on enclosed, private spaces is nonetheless a common element of both regimes (Guano 2002: 187).

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